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ABSTRACT

Over a decade ago, the Minnesota state legislature funded the Council on Quality Education to create nine exemplary and experimental pilot programs to support young children and their families. One of the early models was a family-oriented, structured preschool activity that featured weekly 2-hour sessions during which parents of 4-year-olds worked with their children to build their cognitive abilities. Parents also attended separate parent discussions. Another project focused on training parents as teachers. This 30-week project taught parents with infants and young children to explore play with their children, and to observe and discuss problems with them. This model now forms the basis of early childhood family education programs throughout the state. The programs' major components are parent support, programming for early childhood education, and home learning experiences. Recent innovations in the program include family programs for at-risk parents, "Daddy with Kids" sessions, programs for foster parents and natural parents, parent sessions held from Native American and Hmong perspectives, and a discovery center for peaceful conflict resolution through play. A study of the long-term effects of these programs in one community revealed positive influences on the social and cognitive development of the children and on parent attitudes toward child rearing and education. (AC)

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Early childhood family education: Implementing the Minnesota model

Education de la premiere enfance: Mise en oeuvre de modele Minnesota

La educacion de la familia y la ninez: Poner en practica el modelo de Minnesota

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Abstract

At the "end of the year" gathering for an early childhood family education program, a parent said (with tears in her eyes), *This program has meant so much to me. I was new in town and a single parent. I didn't know where to go. . . the discussion and the support, the staff, the friends I've made. This Early Childhood Family Education Program has meant so much to me, more than I can say.* Many parents joined in making similar comments. This paper will describe the model which has generated such responses from so many parents. First, the major components of the Minnesota model--parent support, early childhood programming, and home learning experiences--will be discussed. Second, the paper will trace the history of the model. Over a decade ago, the legislature of the state of Minnesota funded the Council on Quality Education to create nine exemplary and experimental pilot programs to support young children and their families; today Early Childhood Family Education programs are funded throughout the state and open to everyone. Third, recent innovations such as the following will be described: amazing new born session, family programs for parents "at risk," "Daddy with Kids" sessions, programs for foster parents and natural parents, "traditional" parent sessions (from an Ojibwe Native American and Hmong perspectives), and the Discovery Center for peaceful conflict resolution through play. Finally, reports from a study conducted in a community will highlight the long-term effects of such a program on the social and cognitive development of children and on parent attitudes toward child rearing and education. Program materials will be shared and time will be allocated for questions and discussion.

Today we are going to discuss programs which focus on family support, more specifically on support for parents as they become parents. Because there is much mobility in the United States and parents do not have the support of extended family, and because there is no overall societal support system for children and families, early childhood family-based programs have developed.

Minnesota is a leading state in the United States in offering programs for families with young children. This program is called early childhood family education.

EARLY HISTORY

In the late 1970's, the state of Minnesota began a program called Council for Quality Education or CQE for short. This program developed models for the state to follow. One of the models developed was a program that served parents with young children.

One of the early models was in St. Cloud, Minnesota. It was called Family Oriented Structured Preschool Activity. Here parents of four year olds came with their children once a week to a place called Seton Hall. During the two hour period, the parents first stayed with their children, working with various activities at learning centers. Many of the activities were designed to build the cognitive abilities of children--there were activities for counting, sorting, color recognition and the like. During the last part of the period, parents separated and then went to a parent discussion about issues that concerned them.

Some of the early topics dealt with preparing children for school, discipline issues, nutrition. Parents also had varieties of learning kits which they could check out and use at home. Kits were available for body awareness, auditory, visual. motor, time, pre-reading, pre-math, and enrichment. These kits were of great interest to the parents--they offered ways that parents could interact in developmentally appropriate ways with their children.

This program developed because teachers of older children felt that it was too late to deal with specific problems of children when they were older. It was felt that if parents and children could learn positive ways of interacting and parents could learn positive ways of supporting their children's learning, that many later problems children experience in school could be avoided. (Incidentally, longitudinal research has supported this basic contention--it has been found that $1.00 spent in early childhood programs saves $7.00 spent in the juvenile court system, that there are fewer teen pregnancies, that there is more productive work life for those children, particularly disadvantaged children, who have high-quality early childhood experiences). So the program in Minnesota developed.

Many other CQE projects also developed similar models. Duluth had a model which sought to serve families in a low socio-economic area of the city.

THE PARENTS ARE TEACHERS PROGRAM: A NATIONALLY VALIDATED MODEL

Later, it was felt that the program should extend to families not just with four year olds, but with infants and toddlers. It is this program which I would like to share with you in a little more depth today.

This program goes for thirty weeks and includes 12 families in a single group. Within this, there are three phases, each with ten weeks: phase one is called "exploring play together;" phase two is called "learning to observe;" phase three is called "discussing problems together." For each phase, objectives and types of debriefing questions used with parents are included.

Phase One--Exploring Play Together

The first ten weeks is for parents to explore play with their children. During the first day, parents explore the environment with their children. You can see that the objectives are as follows:

Objectives

**Parents will play in the play environment with their child.*
**Parents will notice their child's response to the environment.*
**Staff will respond to parents laying the ground for the development of trust.*
**Parents will have an opportunity to discuss the play experience during a debriefing time.*

As you can see, there is a great emphasis on parents becoming perceptive observers of their children--to learn how to pick up on cues which their child is giving. This is the development of sensitive caregiving where parents learn contingent pacing--modifying their own agendas to meet the needs of children. It is like a partnership of parent and child, each becoming involved with the other and with materials.

Debriefing Questions

At the ending of the sessions, there is a time when parents talk together with each other--they share information and feelings supported by a professionals staff person. Questions which they would discuss are as follows:

**What was this experience like for you?*
**What are the characteristics of your child's attention span?*
**Does your child prefer playing alone or with someone?*
**What kind of interaction did you notice between the children?*
**Does your child want you to be a playmate?*
**What role do you take when your child doesn't want to play with you?*
**Do you think it is important to allow your child alone time to practice and to be in charge?*
**Which situations came up in the playtime for which you had to establish limits?*
**What did you notice about your child's competency at play?*

These questions refer to many aspects of parent/child/environment interaction. How long children are engaged in any one activity is one issue. Certain types of

materials--water play, sand play, have been found to be very beneficial in involving the children for long periods of time. Parents begin to notice how their children are involved with materials.

How parents come to understand how their children interact with other children is another area. Parents in the United States are greatly concerned about how their children get along with others--most parents do not want their children to be isolated from other children and be outcasts. There is a feeling that this would greatly affect their development. But here parents may learn that it satisfactory for children to be alone at times, to explore materials. They may also learn ways to help children enter groups if they are having difficulty.

Other aspects of exploring play include the following. Parents use parallel talk (this is when teachers describe for children what they are doing--you are making a block tower), self talk (this describes for children what the teacher is doing--I am making a road from blocks), expansive talk--reading to children. Parents learn when to intervene and when not intervene in children's play--being selective in their interventions. Sometimes it is very important to help the child solve problems rather than rescue the child. For example if a young child is caught under a table, it is important to guide the child through the process of getting out from under table rather than picking the table up, thus freeing the child). Finally, parents watch somewhat as staff people begin to establish relationships with their children--here is where parents begin to let go of their child and see that children can be happy with other adults.

Second Phase--Learning to Observe

The second ten weeks of the program is the observation phase. Parents move behind a screen in the room to observe their children. Children are free to "check in" with their parents as needed. Here are the objectives for the first part of this phase:

Objectives

**Parents will observe their child at play being aware of the experience for themselves and their child.*
**The staff carer will try to establish relationships with two children during the snack and circle times.*
**Staff and parents will be respectful of the child's separation development.*

These objectives focus on helping parents tune into their own feelings--this is an important part of the program. Adults as well as children need to be able to identify their own feelings, to accept these feelings, and to learn how to deal with them. Through much of the research on attachment and separation, it has been found that children who are securely attached to their parents do (as a natural part of development) have difficulty separating from their loved one. In fact, this is one indication of secure attachment. Parents learn to value this whole dimension of separation and what it means.

Debriefing Questions

Following are statements which parents discuss when they conclude the session--with a professional as a facilitator. Parents and staff will discuss their responses to the following statements.

**I will look to you (the child) for information about what to teach now.*
**I will give you (the child) plenty of time in each stage and not push you to the next.*
**I trust that you (the child) know where you are going.*
**I will involve you in caring activities for a feeling of teamwork so you feel part of the task rather than as if you are always being done to.*
**I will give you privacy, space, and time alone.*
**I will let you solve problems yourself, only helping a little when you get stuck.*
**I will be honest with you and let you be honest with me.*
**I will let you express your feelings.*

As you can see from the above statements, they reflect this sensitive, respectful caregiving, this "tuning in" to children.

Parents learn to focus observations on how the child shows trust or distrust--how is the child dealing with separation? is the child beginning to trust other children? Parents observe how special rituals help a child cope with separation. They also look at what the child is doing when allowed to explore freely. Other observations focus on conflict management, social emotional development and its tie to child development, the expression of feelings, and selective intervention.

Phase Three--Discussing Issues

The third ten-week phase is called discussion. This is where parents spend part of the time playing with their children and part of time separated from them in discussion.

Objectives

**Staff will share family systems theory--open families and closed families.*
**Parents will look at and discuss their families of origin.*

The open family has direct, clear communication, is highly supportive, has rules that fit the family, has constructive outcomes that are possible to achieve, emphasize creativity and individuality, and have much forgiveness for transgressions. The closed family has unclear and unspecific communication, low self esteem, has fixed rules which don't change based on the family, emphasize external rewards from others, conformity and uniformity, and lack forgiveness. Parents begin to look at the needs in their own family systems.

According to Bronfenbrenner, a psychologist-educator in the United States, the family in which a parent was raised has effects on that parent. Often a parent will find themselves doing the same things that were done to them as a child. Through discussion, positive aspects aspects from the family of origin continue, while the negative aspects can be brought out and discussed. This often means that change can occur.

Other discussions focus on the family as a system, how the parents can be facilitators of their children's learning, creativity, communication, assertiveness , television in the home, nutrition. Other issues can be brought up by parents as needed. There is no lecture is this program. The material is discussed by parents with a professional group facilitator. There are strong feelings of caring and support which arise among the parents who are part of the group.

EARLY CHILDHOOD FAMILY EDUCATION TODAY A DESCRIPTION FROM DULUTH, MINNESOTA

This model--play, observation, and discussion--forms the basic structure of early childhood family education across the state of Minnesota today. It is funded partly with parent fees and partly through taxes which people pay to the school district. No parent is refused who cannot pay.

Let us consider Duluth, Minnesota, a city of approximately 90,000 people. In this city, there currently are six neighborhood centers and nine specialized programs.

The Early Childhood Family Education Neighborhood Centers have programs similar to the FOSPA and Parents are Teachers programs described above. The specialized programs are described below:

Parent Infant Program offers programs for parents and their babies in hospitals right after birth. The program is called the Amazing Newborn whose purpose is to enhance the parent-infant relationship and thus ease the transition to going home. It has been cited by Bank Street College as being an exceptional program. Special single night sessions on selected topics are offered periodically for parents and their young babies.

Traditional American Indian Parenting provides an opportunity for Indian families to enjoy activities together and allows parents to explore culturally relevant methods of child rearing. It includes elders as primary teachers and supporters of parents.

Kindergarten Connection is offered each spring for children who will be attending kindergarten and their parents. Kindergarten staff from the local elementary school visit the program and answer parents' questions. This will help parents feel comfortable about this new event in their children's lives.

Bridges is a program with for parents with children in foster care. It provides specific supports for parents in this situation and suggests ways to maintain contact with children.

Daddy and Me is a program for fathers and their young children. It has components similar to the neighborhood centers but with special emphasis on play with dad. The fathers also form a support group for each other.

Habitat is a program for teen parents and their babies. It offers child care during the day when parents are enrolled in high school classes. It also has a block of time for parenting classes for the teen parents.

Families in Recovery is a program for families where one or more members is recovering from alcohol and other drug abuse. These families often need extensive support from each other as well as the parent facilitator in order to maintain sobriety and positive family interactions.

Art Gallery is a program for parents where they create individual and group projects during their "parenting session." The projects have helped people relax, socialize, and express themselves in new ways. It has helped to build community and opened new avenues for adult fund.

Family Literacy is a pilot program where a five-part model involves Hmong children and their parents in literacy development. Families create themes they wish to study, hear stories, create projects, write about the projects, and share ideas with one another.

EFFECTIVENESS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD FAMILY EDUCATION

Statewide Study

Today, Minnesota's Early Childhood Family Education is the nation's largest and oldest program. During the 1990-91 school year, it served 213,000 young children and their parents and was funded by over $26 million in state aid and local levies. Typically programs include parent discussion groups, play and learning activities for children, parent-child interaction activities, special events for the entire family, information on other community resources for families and young children and lending libraries. Some programs also include home visits and early screening for children's health and developmental problems.

A research study was developed by representatives from twenty-four different sites under the direction of Michael Patton and Betty Cooke. After development and pilot of an interview process, parents new to the program were interviewed just prior to the first class period and again at the end of the school year. One hundred eighty three parents completed the interview process--156 in general parent groups, 16 in parent groups particularly for single parents, and 11 in teen parent groups. Analysis involved identifying changes in the parents' responses over the year (Minnesota Department of Education, 1992).

Among the general parent group, 61 percent of their responses reflected change; 67 percent of the single parents reflected change, and 59 perccent of the teen parents did so. Specific examples of behavior change fell into the following categories: movement from reaction to forethought before actions with children, responding to children's needs and point of view with sensitivity, giving time and attention to the children, giving children choices, encouraging children to explore and solve problems, modeling new behaviors, allowing children to express all types of feelings, redirecting children's behavior, removing themselves from tense situations, and involving another adult when needed. Three-fourths of the parents also observed changes in their children: improved social interaction and relationships, improved sense of self-confidence

and self-esteem, language development and enhanced communication skills, expression of feelings.[1]

Duluth Study

A study of third grade children in Duluth to determine the effects of various early childhood programs was also undertaken. Sixty-three parents from three geographic and socio-economic areas of the city were interviewed. Standardized test data and report card data was examined for the children. Of the sixty-three respondents, twenty had been involved in early childhood family education when their children were of preschool age.

In addition to the effects noted above in the statewide study, parents also indicated that they had skills to undertake change in the school system. When they were not satisfied with an educational program, they could contact the principal. If funding was cut, legislators could be addressed. There was a sense that advocacy skills had been developed and strengthened for these parents. This was in contrast to parents who had children in early childhood programs ONLY. Other data is in the process of being analyzed.

SUMMARY

Beginning with a review of the early history of early childhood family education, this paper then addressed components of a nationally validated model, a description of programming in a single city, and research studies concerning the effectiveness of early childhood family education.

The Early Childhood Family Education Program of the University of Minnesota, Duluth, is an example of one way that parents' needs are being met. As these types of programs continue to grow, support for parents can grow and perhaps create a brighter future for young children and their families.

[1]Minnesota Department of Education (1992). *Changing Times, Changing Families; Parent Outcome Interview Study Summary.*